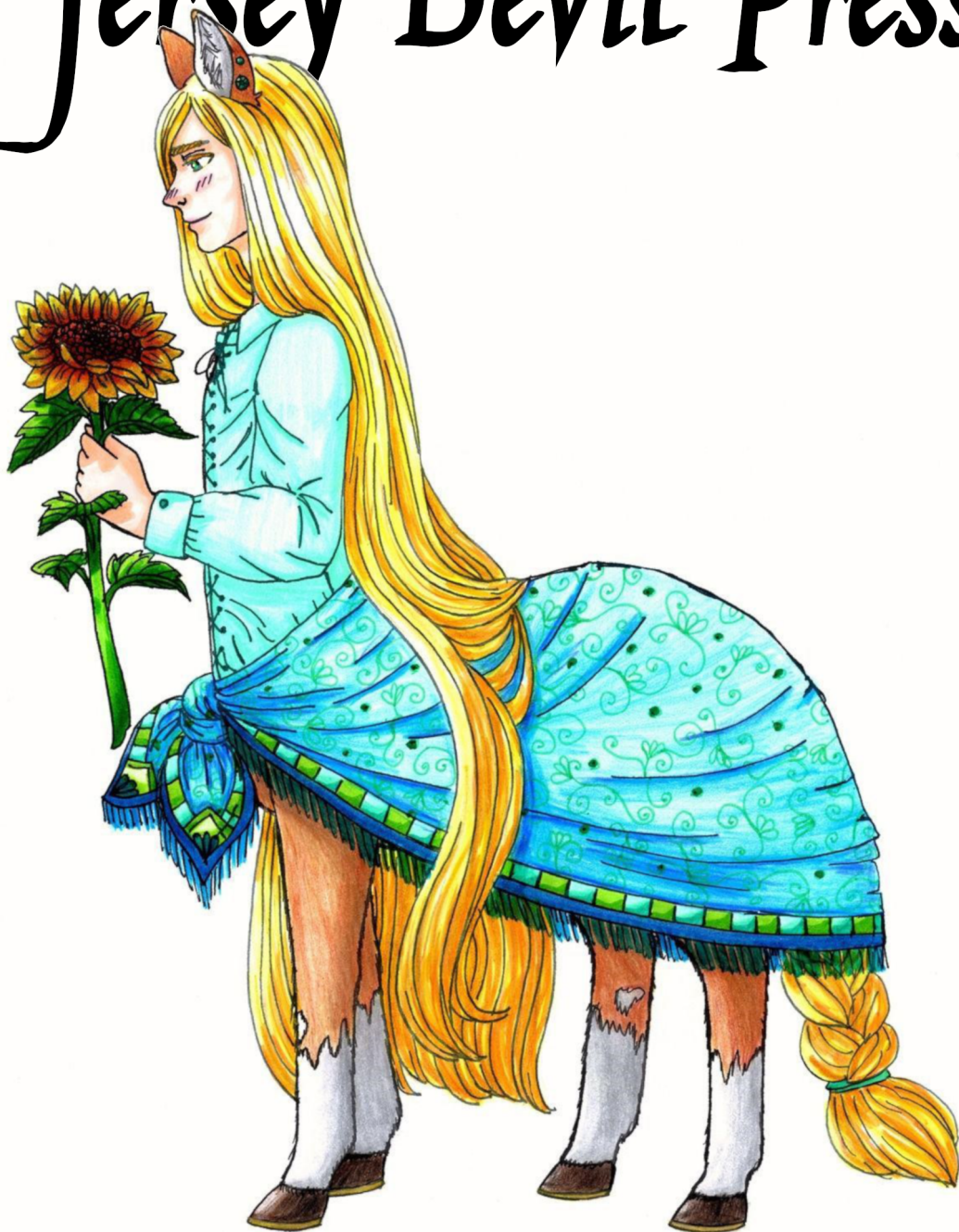


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Editor's Note

It's April, nerds, and you know what that means! Slippery amphibians! Fractured fairy tales! Poetic pond(ering)s! Sweet, melancholy 90s nostalgia! Terrifying land mermaids! Harlem Renaissance greats photographing the undead!

Oh.

Well, that's what it means to us.

It might be the cruelest month in the Waste Land, but April's the coolest month here in the Pine Barrens. Pull up a rotting log and join our circle for a spell. Or a charm. Or a full-body transfiguration; we dabble in all the Magicks . . .

Angler

Wendy Maxon

The Angler family was going to the reservoir again. All of them this time: Mama Tallulah, and Jay Jay and Bettina and Estelle, all three of her children with their pouty lips, toothy grins, tanned legs, and the blonde Medusa hair they'd been so blessed to inherit. (*Deserved* to inherit, fifteen-year-old Estelle always demanded. *Christ*, all the help they gave that woman.) All ten of them ready to depart for the reservoir—Mama, her three kids, and Mama's six male suitors. The tiny, thumb-sized, flaccid men that had fused to Mama's skin and now dangled from her arms and belly like sardines, held fast by the sutures along their crusty dried lips. All of them, ready for a brand-new day of sunning and hunting.

"Bring me my cigarettes, honeys," Mama said from the back porch as she scratched at her right thigh. "Your Mama needs to be her calmest, prettiest self if you want her to take good care of y'all."

Jay Jay and Bettina tottered off through the tall, yellowed grass to retrieve the half-ravaged box from the picnic table. "Here you go now, Mama," Bettina said, handing over Tallulah's Pall Malls.

"Have you got on your *signature scent*, Mama?" piped up Jay Jay, the youngest. "You smell like a field of daisies on a summer day. Gonna make capture a breeze."

At the end of the sitting bench, Estelle rolled her large brown eyes and sulked as she fingered the threads along the hem of her ivory dress.

"Well, yes I have." Mama stroked her voluptuous shoulders. She stood and ran her hands down her body and over the minnow

adorning her left thigh. "All this is for you, my babies. I swear, I never had such good babies as you. Look at what y'all do for me. You wouldn't go and leave your Mama now, would you?" She leaned over to hug Bettina, and a ripple of armpit fat sprang from the top of her blue sequined tube top. "I just don't know what I'd do without my honeys."

"Ooooooh, you do smell nice, Mama!" Bettina cradled into the fleshy folds of Tallulah's elbow, delighted. "We can't even smell those other ones anymore. All that sourness disappeared!"

Estelle wrinkled her nose and pointed to the dapper figurine sagging beside Mama's ear. "Like that one, in his idiotic business suit. Stank like old mushrooms."

"Yeah! Or ooooooh, remember how bad daddy number three smelled, Mama?" Bettina pointed at the pale protrusion sticking out of Tallulah's thick calf.

"I got you daddy number three from the licker store and he smelled like wet dog, but he gave Jay Jay her blue eyes," Tallulah said. (Daddy number three's eyes sure did look sad now, pointed at the ground.)

Estelle stroked her own shoulders. She'd tried to trail Mama and absorb her daisy perfume, but on Estelle it smelled like toilet cleaner. Maybe you just needed to mix it with sweat or something.

"Don't forget your stuff sacks," Mama said to them. The children grabbed their sacks from beneath the sitting bench and all piled into Mama's gleaming lilac Cadillac, a gift from Estelle's daddy, Daddy number two, before he bit down into Mama and all the blood vessels in his mouth just went haywire. Now Daddy number two got all his nutrients directly from Mama, just like all the other daddies attached to her. She fed them just like her kids,

and in return she got all their love juice whenever she needed. And who didn't need love?

The weather was just perfect, so bright and fine. The roads were clear and the air smelled like fresh baby powder, or maybe fresh kill. That's what Jay Jay liked to call a capture when she was being cute.

That afternoon, the reservoir buzzed with excitement. There were lots of kids playing and bouncing and plenty of men wandering, smoking their cigars and looking at Mama all sidelong. Mama and her three children sipped their Kool-Aid Koolers from green straws as they drew up near the water and settled down onto their towels. The breeze chilled but invigorated them. The world looked as if it had been tinted yellow, especially when the sun hit the patches of desiccated grass.

"Look over there," Bettina said. "There's a fisherman who's got eyes for Mama. Don't worry, there's nothin she can't catch, yet."

The man was rocking back and forth on his kelp boat, the undulations of the dinghy making Estelle's stomach lurch a little. His leathery hands found the brim of his hat, which he tipped toward Mama. He grasped his oar roughly and began to steer the boat into shore.

The wind whipped up again, sending Mama's blond hairdo and signature scent aloft. The man paddled in faster. Estelle sure wished she had a man to paddle in for her. She was getting older and found she liked the drive-in way more than this junky reservoir, with its cigarette butts and burnt foil and occasional dog corpses buried in the sand. She could wear short skirts to the drive-in, just like Mama did, and she could rub her own shoulders. Plus, she never smelled like Ajax at the drive-in, and the boys looked at

her special. Last week she got a free soda from a slender boy with a stuttering problem. Her favorite. The soda, not the boy.

"It's time," Tallulah said, repinning her hairdo without compromising her cigarette. She never took her eyes off the fisherman, who was now trying to ground his boat ashore. "Go get 'em, honeys."

Estelle ran her hand through her hair and frowned. "Aw, do we have to, Mama? I'm so bored. It's every weekend now."

Mama Tallulah's stare practically burned a hole in Estelle's face. "Listen to me," she said in a voice as deep and fiery as her fragrance. "Daisies can only do so much, missy. You know I need y'all to make me's shiny bright as best you can. So you'll get me what we need, right now. Or trust me." She pointed at the sand with a sharpened, honey-gold nail; the ash from Mama's Pall Mall pointed right back at Estelle. "You'll be dead sorry." Estelle shrank back in terror, covering her lips with her hands.

"But I don't want Estelle to become a No-mouth!" yelled Jay Jay. "We promise we'll be good. We want to be with you forever, Mama!"

The children scattered in all directions. Mama always warned them about the level of toxic sludge in the shallow part, but there were glinting rocks and gleaming flecks of trash buried all over the sand, and they just needed the shiniest things possible for Mama if she was going to lure in some daddies. They hunted down the treasures and crammed them into their triangular stuff sacks, then flung the sacks onto their backs like they each had an extra dorsal fin. Bettina's fin looked three times bigger than everyone else's, because she was the middle child and the most resourceful at extraction. Plus she felt the closest to Mama, so she gathered the

most. She'd split open the stones and pull out the glittering nuggets from the crevices, brushing off the sand with a little trowel. Sometimes she even caught swipes of the green bioluminescent algae that stood out best against Mama's skin. Then Bettina would hand her haul to Estelle, who would breathe on everything gently, because Estelle was best at blowing, and you don't want to break anything that shines.

The fisherman stepped off his boat and smiled his head off as he wandered over to the nearby shrubs, breaking off a sprig of honeysuckle. He didn't stand a chance against Mama, Estelle thought. She licked her lips and exhaled onto a flat scrap of silver. He squinted, trying to follow the bounce of light across Mama's lengthening throat.

They all beelined for Mama at the same time. The kids held their metal trinkets, the fisherman his bouquet of bush honeysuckle.

"Ooooooh, who's this?" Bettina asked as she tossed her stuff sack next to the fisherman's hairy, tanned ankle and jumped into Mama's miniskirted lap.

"Hello there," the man said, offering Mama the honeysuckle. It smelled heavenly to Estelle, of course, but she knew that right now the man only had a nose for Mama's daisies. "My name is Josep. What's your name, Miss?"

"You can call me Lula." Mama's drawl carried the undertone of scorched earth.

"I thought you might like this, Miss Lula. It reminds me of your scent. Just...intoxicating."

"Well, thank you," Mama said, teeth shining long, white, and pretty. She nudged Bettina off and rose, standing a good head taller than Josep. "Hold this for me for a second, sugar." She dropped the

flowers from her clenched fist into Bettina's hands, so she could stuff the ridge of fat, soft and white as spoiled milk, back into her tank top.

"Hey, Mister Josep?" Jay Jay had gotten out all her sparklies and was doing her spinning thing now, trying to lure Josep as fast as she could while Tallulah just smoked and smoked and grew even more voluptuous, almost two full heads taller than Josep by now. They were all scrambling to hold up their metallic shards and rocks, causing Josep to blink and widen his eyes in confusion. He gulped, trying to take in all of Tallulah's corpulence and the mysteries behind that widening smile, and Estelle just looked at her Mama in her sequined blue tube top and miniskirt, growing taller and grosser and more appealing than she would ever be in her dumb ivory dress. Same routine, different day.

Estelle took out her biggest scrap of foil from her stuff sack, put it to her tongue, licked it. Then she crushed it as tight as she could and threw it at that pathetic Josep. It hit him square in the neck.

She ran.

The boy that she found clear on the other side of the reservoir had tufts of pale brown hair and cleared his throat more than was necessary. Five minutes prior Estelle had ripped off her dumb dress and thrown it into the honeysuckle bushes. She just wore her nether clothing now — her yellow bikini top and little beige skort.

Mama was so dumb, and these gross sad little fish men who swarmed her just became her accessories. Literal accessories! They'd kiss her and nibble on her ear and then get stuck, and they'd eat off their own faces like so much candy! Like they were

just Mama's play toys! And the three little anglers, she and Bettina and Jay Jay, just twirling and hunting and never getting to be free, all sucked into Mama's spell! And what did it matter if it was you dangling from Mama's calf or sucked into the crook of her fat arm? It was the same!

Well, she'd show Mama. She might have Mama's Medusa hair, but she had her own self and her own body and her own big-toothed grin. And this boy with hair tufts was watchin her something fierce, over where he stood by the bait and tackle shop.

He was sipping a soda out of a long green straw, which reminded her of the Kool-Aid Cooler that she'd left over by Mama and the towels. So she walked right up to the snack counter next to the bait store, and she ordered herself an extra Kool-Aid Cooler, all by herself, confident and proud. Told them exactly how many scoops of sugar she wanted in it, too, thrusting her hip and casting her pointing finger around like nobody's business. But she hadn't brought any money with her. She looked around.

The boy shambled over and produced a dollar. Estelle shifted her weight and looked him up and down. "You're sweet. You got a name?"

"Steffen." He paused. "What's your name?" he asked, blinking. Like he was nervous.

"Call me Stella."

"You sure do like a lot of sugar in your drink."

Estelle laughed, deep and throaty. "I sure do."

Steffen had a line of greasy pimples dotting his chin, but Estelle glowed in a different way, like somehow a beacon was emanating from her forehead and long, slender neck. Why hadn't she ever noticed how long her neck had grown? She stroked it gently,

resting her hand in the small of her throat. Her nails had grown, too, despite her always biting them while waiting for Mama on the sitting bench. But today, for some reason her nails were in great shape. Real beauties. They extended far beyond the nail bed, and she could feel them scratching her skin as she massaged her clavicle.

She shook her head. No, she didn't want to be that girl, a Tallulah kind of girl, who beat everyone into submission. Mama was awful, the way she would dig her claws into Estelle's shoulders when she whined or flick hot ash into her hair, or yank Estelle by her lips until she squealed in agony. The pain and that blue ring of a bruise terrified Estelle so much that she refused to go to the drive-in for a whole month! Tallulah apologized over and over, insisting that Estelle was her best friend, and why would a best friend want to leave her? Who would fetch her cigarettes and love her forever? Nobody, goddammit! Nobody wanted to leave Mama—nor were they allowed to. Mama's honeys stuck close to her forever, like Bettina and Jay Jay and also the daddies, who swung from Mama like crystals on a giant chandelier.

Estelle wouldn't dare abandon Mama, until now.

Besides, Estelle thought as she looked at the back of her smooth hand to admire her nails' shape and shine, there was no need to *shred* Steffen. Maybe just...play with him for a bit. See how far she could take this. See how far he might follow. Would he shadow her all the way to the reservoir, scrambling behind her as she danced her way across the tall golden grass back to Mama? What about if she swayed like *this*?

The answer was: he sure would. All it took was one little extra squeeze around her Kool-Aid Cooler and she knew he could smell

her daisies just by looking at his dumb grin. She asked if he'd like to come to her towel and help her put on her lotions, maybe look at the gold shells her little sisters had scavenged and see if any'd fit into her belly button. She promised "No funny business, sir. My Mama's present!" then fired a huge wink at him. Then she wound her blond Medusa tendrils around her nails and swiveled away, and next thing she knew, she'd made it all the way back to her scrawny towel with Steffen scurrying behind her.

By then Mama had shrunk back to her normal size again, which was still huge compared to all the other ladies at the reservoir who weren't nearly as talented at capture as she was. Jay Jay and Bettina were admiring Mama's right shoulder, playing with little attached Josep like kittens swatting a toy.

Estelle picked up Steffen's hand and held it up high like the Eiffel Tower, entwined in hers. "Hi Mama. Look what I brought back all by my lonesome." If Mama made a grab for her lips, she knew Steffen would fight for her, maybe give Mama a row with his blotchy fist.

Mama narrowed her eyes, throwing back both shoulders so Josep flung around her like a piece of jewelry. "Good lord, Estelle. What vile mess are you wearing? Tell me that's not daisies I smell."

Estelle thrust her chin up. "No Mama, just off playing with my gentlemen callers like you always do. You know, on a hot, summery day." This was it. She was finally going to be ready for Mama's rage. Already she felt something shimmering inside her, like her own little light that she could use not only to hook Steffen, but also to sear herself clean from Mama. Like when she killed those bugs with the beam of hot sun through a magnifying glass.

To Estelle's surprise, Mama didn't swipe at her. Instead she looked at that dog Steffen and said, "Hello, honey," extending her hand holding the cigarette. The wind kicked up. Something like smoke blew in Steffen's face.

"Mama, no!"

Bettina and Jay Jay just stood there, tense, clutching their shells and trinkets as Mama began to expand. They would usually start spinning now, but they teetered, whipping their heads back and forth from Tallulah to Estelle. Steffen was torn between Estelle and Mama too, but the blue sequins had won his attention.

"You can't have him, Mama!" Estelle screamed. She tried to shove Tallulah's hand away, but it had swelled up colossal and held strong. "He's mine now! He's supposed to be all mine!"

"Ma'am." With eyes only for Mama, Steffen nodded and took the woman's outstretched hand. Mama's long teeth glinted sunlight onto Steffen's oily face as her head began to grow rounder, becoming almost incandescent. He gawked at her while Estelle screamed and screamed at them in the background.

Estelle picked up the half-empty Kool-Aid Cooler she'd left behind and threw it at Steffen's head. It hit him square on the temple, drenching him in red, but no matter. Undeterred, Steffen bent to kiss Mama's palm.

He bit. Something in his face changed, a deepening sense of alarm. He pulled back with a slight tug, but his head stayed put. Iridescent flakes of skin materialized around his lips as his ears jerked back and forth, but nothing moved. Mama's body began to recede to its normal shape, and as she did so, Steffen shrank with her. His body dwindled to no bigger than a finger.

Mama cackled.

Tears poured down Estelle's face as she threw her hands in the air. She felt a flush rise, coursing through her like she was trapped to the earth, to this reservoir, to Mama forever. "He was mine. I needed him. This isn't a life, Mama."

"Stop your babbling," Tallulah said, the violence rising in her voice. "You don't understand, sweet baby. I need all of you if I'm na get that love. My honeys are all I have in my life." She threw her arm around Estelle, the ridge of fat whacking against her shoulder.

"I hate you. You can't keep me here forever!"

Estelle reached for Mama's hand and grabbed Steffen, then pulled as hard as she could, ripping Steffen from Mama's hand. His sad, withered lips tore free, taking along thick chunks of Tallulah's palm. Mama's unholy cry rung through the air. Estelle ignored her outburst, jamming Steffen over and over into her own belly button like she was stabbing herself dead.

The hunks of Mama's flesh still bound to Steffen's mouth began to knit themselves into Estelle's body, working their way through her, binding the two together more than ever. Strange new feelings coursed through Estelle, little gurgles in her stomach now, as the horror of what was happening struck her. Steffen stuck straight out of Estelle's belly button like one of Mama's prized cigarettes.

Mama stood agog. An enormous red hole gaped in the middle of her hand.

Jay Jay began to cry. "Estelle! Look out! She's gonna yank your lips and you'll be a No-mouth!"

"Shut up!" Mama shouted, clamping her bloodied hand onto Jay Jay's jaw and shaking her up and down, just once. Jay Jay's eyes went wild, then glassy. She didn't make a sound. Mama removed

her hand, leaving Jay Jay with nothing but glazed eyes and a long stretch of taut, blue-veined skin for a face. The littlest Angler toddled away, stumbling here and there, with nobody to beseech. She limped around the towels until one of her little feet sank into the sand. Her other foot scrambled clockwise around it, her body circling and circling around the maypole, a tiny mouthless ballerina burrowing into the earth. Then she stopped. Faceplanted. She lay completely still, her blond curls bent at odd angles.

Mama turned her red-rimmed, pained eyes on Estelle and snarled. "Get gone, you little bitch."

Estelle whirled around, not knowing what to do. She had to get out of there, now, quickly, but she had this new *thing* poking out of her. Not to mention no idea what home meant anymore. Breathing fast, Estelle looked down and fled in the direction toward which Steffen's body pointed. She should go somewhere brighter, somewhere warm and welcoming and golden. She had a new life to begin, her own. Away from Mama. *Free of Mama!* she insisted to herself.

The dread in her gut told her differently, though.

The air had cooled down, making Estelle shiver as she bolted toward the setting sun wearing her bikini top. The stiff branches and curled leaves on the honeysuckle bushes scratched her as she scrambled through the brush. What was she supposed to do now? The uncertainty was making her insides twist up. She could hear the slams of car doors, kids crying in their car seats, tires squealing as families pulled out of parking lots to head home after a long day of fun in the sun. Maybe the cars were Cadillacs just like Mama's.

She was panting now. Her scratches kept tingling, and her feet burned as she ran. Seemed like nobody was around anymore, not

the children or the fishermen or even the young men she liked to watch. Had everyone left? She kind of understood what Mama meant when she fumed about being abandoned, being left behind by those who'd once held you close.

Once she reached the clearing, Estelle paused to catch her breath. She dabbed her eyes and wiped the wetness onto Steffen, then took hold and wiggled her new ornament back and forth. Thank god he was there. Sure, he was gangly, but he was kind of cute, all up in her like that. Plus, being as he was on her belly, maybe he could help steer her the right way. She pinched him, hard, just for good measure. Steffen probably'd love her something fierce, and maybe it wasn't a bad thing to have too much company. She seized Steffen, whispered him some secrets, and squeezed really hard. And then she felt something else, something young and squiggly, at home in there with her too.

WENDY MAXON lives in California. She spent most of her life studying the history of twentieth century war and art, and she teaches various Humanities and history classes. She appreciates satire and cultural subversion and recently designed a school field trip involving the Madonna Inn, several art galleries, and roller derby. Writing has been a dream of hers since she wrote a two-page novel at age five. She is currently getting her MFA in Fiction at the University of Riverside Palm Desert.

Changing

Margarita Serafimova

I was a salamander endemic to the sea,
its silver I was turning into gold, and myself—
into light, to the point of disappearance.

MARGARITA SERAFIMOVA was shortlisted for the Montreal International Poetry Prize, Summer Literary Seminars Contest, University Centre Grimsby Literary Prize; long-listed for the Christopher Smart (Eyewear Publishing) Prize, Erbacce Press Poetry Prize, Red Wheelbarrow Prize; nominated for Best of the Net. She has work appears in *Agenda Poetry*, *London Grip*, *Waxwing*, *Trafika Europe*, *European Literature Network*, *A-Minor*, *Poetry South*, *Great Weather for Media*, *Orbis*, *Nixes Mate*, *StepAway*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, *Mookychick*, *HeadStuff*, *Minor Literatures*, *Writing Disorder*, *Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Orbis*, *Chronogram*, *Noble/ Gas*, *Origins*, *Journal*, *miller's pond*, *Obra/ Artifact*, *Central and Eastern European London Review*, *TAYO*, *Guttural*, etc. Visit: facebook.com/MargaritaSerafimova/

Big Problems

Aeryn Rudel

Gorrus crawled on his hands and knees through the narrow halls of his house. His bedroom was the only room that could accommodate a giant's frame only because he'd knocked down the walls of the adjoining rooms. He could almost lie down without bending his knees, but the ceiling was so low he couldn't sit up, let alone stand.

He reached the stairs—tiny and wholly insufficient to hold his weight—and heaved over the second-floor railing and down onto the first story. He'd knocked out most of the walls here, too, and removed a large portion of the ceiling in the western wing of the house. This area had become his dining room. It allowed him to take his meals sitting up, the top of his great bald head poking through the hole in the ceiling.

Gorrus continued through the first story, which he kept as clean as he could manage. He had little space to keep his personal possessions, and most of the first floor was given over to dirty laundry, a stinking mound of sweat-stained shirts and trousers the size of a small hillock. He had to do his washing in the swimming pool—the first swimming pool anyway. He'd had a second installed so he could perform his necessary bodily functions. It didn't flush like a proper toilet, and he had to clean it out on a daily basis or the neighbors would complain about the smell. The last thing he needed was another lecture from the Bureau of Fae Affairs about "fitting into his new life."

He reached the garage, his knees and wrists aching from winnowing through his tiny house like the world's largest rodent. He'd widened the interior entrance to the garage shortly before moving in, and the front door was now the garage door. Gorrus mashed the tiny button that raised it with one baseball-bat-sized finger. It took him more than a dozen tries to summon the necessary finesse to hit the button just right.

Finally, with a terrible rattle and squeaking, the garage door rose along its track. The full fury of the morning sun shone on his tired, bloodshot eyes. He'd recently found a brewery that would supply beer by the barrel. Last night he'd finished off six.

Gorrus crawled out through his garage and onto his driveway where he could finally stand. He rose from hands and knees to his full twenty-five-foot height. He winced as his knees popped like cannon blasts and his lower back made noises that sounded like every vertebrae was slipping its moorings. He glanced around the street, looking at the other houses on his block. Most were similar to his—two-story jobs with what he liked to call “faux fairy finish.” Another attempt by the good ol' BFA to make their residents feel like they were still living in the enchanted forest. His own house looked like it had been set atop a massive tree stump—if tree stumps were made of concrete with plastic and stucco bark.

Grumbling, Gorrus glanced around for his morning paper, locating it in the gutter. He bent down, snatched the paper between thumb and forefinger, and shoved it into his shirt pocket. Now it was time for his morning confirmation of failure and misery. He turned to the west, to the wealthiest area of town, where his old house towered over the city, nestled atop the viny spire of an enchanted green monolith. His beautiful house in the clouds, with

halls and rooms and, oh, god, toilets designed for giants, with ceilings even he could not reach without standing on his tiptoes. His beautiful house, his mansion in the sky, now owned by that idiot Jack and the puny little bastard's wretched spawn.

Gorrus stared at his old home, thinking about the giant-sized axe in the garage and trying to summon the old giant-sized rage. Then he remembered the giant-sized restraining order the BFA helped Jack file against him and he just felt old, tired, and beaten. He unleashed a heavy sigh that bowed and shook nearby trees, got down on his hands and knees again, and crawled back into his house. The groaning shriek of the garage door lowering might have been the world's most pathetic death knell.

AERYN RUDEL is a freelance writer from Seattle, Washington. He is the author of the Acts of War novels published by Privateer Press, and his short fiction has appeared in *The Arcanist*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and *Pseudopod*, among others. Aeryn occasionally offers dubious advice on the subjects of writing and rejection (mostly rejection) at www.rejectomancy.com or Twitter @Aeryn_Rudel.

12.17.18

John L. Stanizzi

4.08 p.m.

30 degrees

Pushed east to west, the only open water purls against the ice,
orange-light of winter-dusk infuses late afternoon with a
nocturne melancholy—the open water is black and silky,
dark settles in to itself as one final chickadee clicks in the half-light.

JOHN L. STANIZZI is author of—*Ecstasy Among Ghosts, Sleepwalking, Dance Against the Wall, After the Bell, Hallelujah Time!, High Tide—Ebb Tide, Four Bits—Fifty 50-Word Pieces, and Chants*. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, American Life in Poetry, The New York Quarterly, Blue Mountain Review, Paterson Literary Review, The Cortland Review*, and many others. Stanizzi has been translated into Italian and appeared in many Italian journals. He has read at venues all over New England. Stanizzi teaches literature at Manchester Community College in Manchester, CT, and he lives with his wife, Carol, in Coventry.

Adolescent

Ashley Roth

We glue bindis between our eyes and sing off-key to *Tragic Kingdom*. We dance on dirty laundry and change into the clothes our parents won't let us wear—slips that want to be dresses, short plaid skirts, the dog collar and leash my dad found tangled in my socks.

“Do you know what this means?” he had asked before grabbing my shoulders and pressing my head into the wall. I shut my eyes and said I thought it was punk and goth and all the things he called adolescent and strange. He shook his head and yanked my paintings off the living room wall.

We start a band. We call it Delirium Star. My dad gives me a guitar for Christmas and signs me up for lessons with a man who looks like Andrew McCarthy and quizzes me on chords I never practice. He won't let me learn “Cherub Rock” until we practice “Happy Birthday” and the theme song from *Hawaii Five-0*. Dad shows me how to play “Smoke on the Water.” He says my rhythm is off. She plays her dad's forgotten bass. We lean our instruments on the wall and will them to work. I can smell the watery rust on her bass's thick strings. One night her dad comes home singing “Home on the Range” and waves wiggly, bloody pieces of meat at me—says, “It's venison, it's Bambi.” He pushes us out of the way and cradles the bass like he cradles the deer he kills, the way he probably once held

her. We hold hands while he strums something melodic and sad we've never heard before.

We conduct interviews with my dad's old tape recorder. We make fun of boys with yellow bleached hair and pretend to marry the ones who look like Ethan Hawke. We invent elaborate, sensational divorces and fantasize about becoming junkies who only wear sequins, fishnets, and boots from Wild Pair. She'll wear the silver ones with the glowing rubbery sole; I'll wear black ones with chunky, serrated heels.

We record ourselves singing the songs we write in Sharpie on our bedroom walls, lyrics that don't rhyme on purpose. Lyrics about things like patricide and love we know nothing about. We interview each other with dramatic syrupy voices; we ask about masturbation and orgasms we've never experienced. We turn off the lights and try it ourselves from opposite sides of the room with rumbling handheld massagers we muffle with blankets her great-grandma crocheted. The blankets smell like rotting flowers and wet vitamins.

"Are you done?" she asks. I hear the tape recorder click before I tell her I'm finished. I worry about being famous one day.

When Kurt Cobain died, we came to school with our cut out articles from the Oregonian. We cried and the newspaper ink smeared into our fingerprint ridges. We carried the folded scraps, lodging them in the plastic pocket of our decorated binders. The other kids tease us. They say our leather jackets smell funny and

our flannel is frayed. They don't understand why we bring our lunch in metal toolboxes or why we shop at Value Village on purpose. They don't understand why we sew patches on our backpacks, over the holes in our jeans. They don't understand why we still mourn Kurt. They like Amy Grant and Boyz II Men. They like that our teacher brings a shiny acoustic guitar and sings to us about fractions and brain parts and the meaning of irony. She and I hate his guitar. We hate the way his hair swoops like Jason Priestley. We hate how tan his skin is and imagine he's from somewhere like Florida and probably hates how much it rains here. When Kurt Cobain died, he didn't play his guitar, but didn't stop smiling either. We don't eat our lunch, we just sit in the quiet hallway kicking the bottoms of our Converse on the slippery stairs.

"How would you do it?" she asks, her hands little balls nestled between her denim legs.

I think I might jump off the Hollywood Sign when I visit my mom in the summer. An old actress did that in the 30s when they told her she was washed up, that there was someone better. My mom and her husband live within walking distance of the sign. They would never hear me walking up the dry sandy road. They wouldn't hear the metallic ring of chain-linked fence when I jump over it and crawl up the letters I imagine feel like plastic, like the handles of spoons.

"Well?" she asks again.

"I wouldn't want it to be messy," I tell her, "so maybe I'd swallow pills. That always seems like a fancy way to go."

"But what about the ones that puke all over themselves? That's messy."

"I'd turn on the oven and stick my head in."

"Nope. That's taken. It wouldn't even be right to do it that way—it's like she owns it. Pick another."

"I'd stuff silk stockings into the pipe of a car and park it in a garage."

"You don't have a garage."

"My aunt does."

She smiles, but her eyes fill with tears. Her irises and pupils look like they're floating on an oceanic horizon. I wonder if she's even seen that—the sun dipping into a blackened strip of water, painting the tips orange and pink and yellow.

"The way I'd do it would be messy," she tucks her chin into her chest and her shoulders shake. "I'd take that gun my dad uses to kill deer that didn't do anything to him and I'd blow my brain all over his living room. Maybe all over his baseball cards he keeps in that glass cabinet."

She looks at me again and wipes her eyes.

"I'd be like Kurt," she smiles.

The bell rings and we stand up. We walk back to class and talk about how we want to get silver pants and want to make jewelry from old bottle caps.

ASHLEY N. ROTH writes from Nashville, Tennessee. Her work has previously appeared in *decomp*, *Literary Orphans*, *Moonsick Magazine*, and others. You may find her anywhere there are historic buildings, stray cats, vegan sweets—or at www.ashleynroth.com.

Zora and the Zombie

Lauren Tivey

Central Hospital, Port-au-Prince, 1937

It lurches into the sun-bleached yard
on dusty, cracked feet, yellow-clawed,
drab linen shift over a bony frame, limbs
reckless, akimbo, a terrifying ragdoll,
blank black face with empty eyes, floating
nightmare head on a stick of a neck. Zora
views this wreckage of a once-woman, this
animated corpse pitching before her, hears
dreadful guttural emissions from its throat,
and—ever the pro—grasps her Kodak tighter,
fingerprints smearing the *Bakelite* case,
chides herself for courage in the name
of anthropology. The only thing to do
in the face of the fiend: get the shot
and run, practically pissing herself,
toward safety. Later, in the darkroom,
a blotch blooming in the acid bath,
saturated paper floating, undulant
shadows. And then, black hellebore
face emerging, an ink smudge, devoid.
Zora lights a cigarette; slow exhale
through the nostrils, sly smile curling
at the edge of her scarlet lips.

Note: Author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston traveled to Haiti to study folklore and voodoo in the 1930s; while there, she learned of the case of real-life “zombie,” Felicia Felix Mentor, and photographed her. The photo appeared in LIFE Magazine in December, 1937.

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On the cover:

“Pony Boy”

JOEL HOCHSTRASSER is an aspiring artist and writer currently attending Pierce College in Washington state. While you're more likely to see Sasquatch shopping for furniture at your local Ikea than to see Joel out in broad daylight, he does enjoy walking along the water when the sun is setting. He loves seeing the content that others create, as well as putting his own out into the world.

